CHURCH AND POLITICS IN RENAISSANCE ITALY

THE LIFE AND CAREER OF
CARDINAL FRANCESCO SODERINI (1453–1524)

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INTRODUCTION

Because of the wealth of records available and the complex structure of the Florentine political system, recent Florentine political history has concentrated upon internal matters; it has concerned itself primarily with microstudies either of relatively short chronological periods or with more and more intensive studies of groupings, areas or families. But although much of the analysis focuses on a period of Florentine history during which the fortunes of the Florentine state cannot be understood outside an international context, the implications of this statement have not been examined. While the purely diplomatic history of the period continues to attract attention, the way in which links between particular individuals, families and regimes, and foreign powers, interacted with and played a large part in shaping the course of Florentine politics, has been largely ignored. In order to study this subject it is necessary, in particular, to reinstate the crucial role played by Rome, and contacts with Rome, in Florentine politics. For if Italy had become the cockpit of European politics, one of the major centres of the European political system was Rome. Its standing as the capital of christendom and the engagement in politics of a succession of popes, taken in conjunction with the considerable wealth and patronage which ecclesiastical office could bestow upon its holders, all ensured that influence at Rome became a political asset of the greatest importance in late fifteenth- and early sixteenth-century Italy.

Despite this, both the nature of the links between Florence and Rome and the lifestyle and activities of the powerbrokers of papal Rome have remained virtually unexplored by historians of the renaissance. This book seeks to throw light on both these basic problems through an analysis of the life of one person – cardinal Francesco Soderini. The critical role played in his career first by his links with the French monarchy and second by his independent status as a curia cardinal, together with his close identification with the regime of his brother

Piero, combine to make him an excellent example of the interplay between Florentine politics, influence at Rome and connections with the wider European political system. Similarly, his conduct after the fall of the Florentine republic shows clearly the way in which Florentine politics cannot be understood outside a context broader than that provided by a concentration on events inside Florence itself. In the long term, an examination of Soderini's circumstances demonstrates how the power disputes of renaissance politics shifted from Florence to Rome, and anticipates, in several senses, the subsequent shift of battlefield from Rome to Paris which can be seen to have taken place later in the sixteenth century after the election of Clement VII.

It is normally assumed that a sequence of well-defined and well-known family rivalries and factions, such as Medici versus Soderini, Guelph versus Ghibelline, Valois versus Hapsburg, and Orsini versus Colonna, dictated political behaviour and groupings in renaissance Italy. While this is true at one level, this book demonstrates that overlapping or partially coinciding interests, or individual antagonisms, often resulted in realignment. These sets of oppositions were more fluid and dynamic than they have traditionally been presented, with pairings and re-pairings constantly evolving. A system of priorities, which themselves were susceptible to change, could subvert the expected and cause very unlikely temporary alliances. In practice, this meant that families did not by any means always function as a collective unit, but individuals arrayed themselves in a more subtle arrangement across the various sides of the dispute or alignment. Sometimes the point of contact between people from opposing family rivalries was that they had an important adversary in common. Relations between these families, factions and groupings were, in consequence, a volatile mixture of tension and accommodation, aggression and rapprochement.

It is therefore essential that an investigation of the life of one Florentine renaissance patrician who became a prince of the church should look at him in the context of his family and city. The Soderini were exceptional in this regard because they seem to have functioned particularly well as a unit; the Medici or the Colonna, by contrast, had renegade members. Francesco's branch of the Soderini was a relatively compact group with few contacts in other branches. Vital to an understanding of his life is an appreciation of Soderini family strategy which, although it promoted rigorous opposition to the Medici after the setting up of the republic, and even more so after 1502, found it necessary at certain vital moments to act in collaboration with the family's most pronounced enemies and sometime cousins from Florence, the Medici. Francesco's most famous brother, Piero, had a

career as *gonfaloniere a vita* in Florence which has attracted considerable attention, but Piero's life in Rome has remained obscured. A new emphasis on the nature of fraternal relations in general is paralleled in this book by the consideration that the bond between Francesco and Piero must have been one of unusual closeness based on a convergence of interest and a lack of jealousy. No instance is known when Francesco and Piero publicly took opposite sides in a dispute of any sort. Various of the Soderini nieces and nephews, including those born to Francesco's sisters, also played their part in the furtherance of Soderini family strategy.

The rationale behind the choice of Francesco Soderini as the hinge upon which this study is hung should be clear. Illumination of the mechanics of the Florence/Rome axis necessitated a Florentine with important political connections in his home city who pursued a successful career at the papal court and provoked international regard. Within these structures, the church was the ideal backdrop and a cardinal an exemplary subject. Soderini was the only Florentine elevated to the cardinalate between Giovanni de' Medici in 1489 and a flock of Medici supporters in 1517. His and his family's links to the French monarchy were another crucial determinant in the equation.

The question which is most often asked about a biography of a member of a recognisable group is the extent to which the individual was typical. Whereas a stereotype of a renaissance cardinal is available, it would be unwise to attempt to write of a so-called typical cardinal. Given the restricted number and nature of the cardinalate, these prelates had certain features in common, but these were just as often a result of their office rather than a cause for it. Soderini's circumstances were exceptional even if his red hat was acquired for the conventional renaissance reasons of dynastic clout, influential friends and the availability of large sums of money. He performed his cardinalitial duties, and the lifestyle he adopted conformed to notions of expected largesse and consumption. However, within these confines there was considerable room for choice. Although it would have been slightly unusual, Soderini could have chosen to devote his energies to spiritual matters; instead he channelled them into Florentine politics and ecclesiastical affairs. Some cardinals became great patrons of art or collectors of antiquities; Soderini spent money on building and altering palaces and acquiring real estate. Instead of trying to ascertain what constitutes a typical cardinal, this book attempts to demonstrate that Soderini made choices about his lifestyle in the same way that he took decisions about his political life: on the basis of need, inclination, habit or duty. As a result, it could be argued that, in many important respects,

there can be no typical cardinal, although a plurality of certain recognisable types does emerge.

After explaining the selection of topic and person, the matter of format still remains. By presenting a combination of narrative, thematic and case-study approaches, this book offers a model for showing how one life can be used to illuminate the renaissance as a whole. Soderini's longevity was a bonus in this respect for, as an adult in the political sphere, he witnessed the gamut of governments in Florence from Lorenzo de' Medici (1469–92) through the republic to Giulio de' Medici, and his period in the cardinalate spanned the reigns of six pontiffs. The variety of his political life also meant that he met most of the famous people of his time, from the relevant Medici, to Machiavelli, to the Borgia, to the kings and queens of France. Likewise, he met the important begetters of art and culture or at least knew, saw and read their artefacts and works. Living through the renaissance as a member of a series of elites, Soderini was literally surrounded by people whose names are still known to us five hundred years later. While his relations with these famous and talented people will always excite interest, it is the underlying structures and patterns of Soderini's life that are most crucial for an understanding of the renaissance.

One benefit of a not merely political biography is that the constantly shifting focus of this telescopic approach can reveal a blurring of boundaries between different sectors of Soderini's activities. Art, culture and politics were often inextricable one from the other, and the same characters reappeared in diverse roles. The private and the public life are not two separate entities but two parts of the same whole; rigid divisions of this kind often prove to be false and unhelpful. A narrative of sorts of the political life of Soderini is counterbalanced by kaleidoscopic regroupings which concentrate upon ecclesiastical and curial affairs and various other thematic aspects of his non-political life in the hope that a final summation would not be able to separate the parts. This approach does mean, however, that there is no single chronology but instead a weaving of dates and information when and where necessary, and occasionally the reader will have to wait for later chapters to receive a more complete picture of events.

It is perhaps misleading even to have raised the notion of a biography, for in the absence of continuous personal papers, letters and diaries, those wishing to reconstruct the life of a renaissance Italian are dependent for information upon the individual's having led an active public life and a noteworthy or notorious private one. Once again, the particular combination of Florentine patrician and statesman, bishop and cardinal proved remarkably fruitful. The archives of Florence, Rome and the

Vatican, when used to complement each other, yield a richness of documentation which can disguise the fact that Soderini's own records have not survived. This material was especially successful for the reconstruction of the official life of a renaissance cardinal and the maintenance of the Medici–Soderini struggle after 1512.

But it would be foolish to deny that Soderini's life would undoubtedly appear very different if it were possible to have access to his own thoughts and opinions. Dependence on mainly non-personal sources creates fallow periods when little or nothing is recorded, and a bias which is difficult to correct. The letters and records of other people at best can only attribute motive, often on the basis of little understanding. Many plans, strategies and connections must be lost to view. The most obvious points about Soderini as a person are often guessed at through oblique references in out-of-the-way places. The reconstruction of Soderini's life in this book has attempted to make a virtue out of necessity by concentrating upon those aspects about which most can be known, such as church affairs and building; ideally, much fuller sections would have been possible on areas such as Soderini's friends and his literary and scholarly life. In the happy event of more information coming to light in the future, there is plenty of room for it to take its place on the no longer quite so skeletal outline of Soderini's life. But it should never be forgotten that, although an exposition of Soderini's life is an end in itself, it is the wider context of the political and ecclesiastical world of the Italian renaissance which that life illuminates that is the real subject of the book.